

Future Tense

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Summary: Ranma gets a bit more of a training journey than he originally wanted

Future Tense

>Ranma 12: Future Tense, formerly "King Of Fighters"

>a storyline in "The Bet" Expansion Set

version
<http://metroanime.home.mindspring.com/>

>
 Ahem, this is an Expansion Set of a previous contribution, one that got a fair amount of heat from certain individuals, still, the vast majority of response was positive, and my concept for King Of Fighters went in a completely different direction from DragonBard's Dragonball variant, so here it is as a minific. Note that the Expansion Sets are just meant to flesh the ideas out a bit, and are no substitute for a nice long continuing series. Of course, this one sort of took off during the rewrite, but then i *like* powerful mature Ranma variants. One of the major things i've tried to do in the rewrite is de-Psycho Akane for those more polite folk out there who actually like Hammergirl.

>
 This was renamed Future Tense to avoid any confusion between DragonBard's King Of Fighters, a videogame of the same name, and this.

>
 The i who is i does not own any of these characters. This is an attempt to be amusing, throw a temporary light moment's reading into what is usually bleak Reality, do not confuse this with Art. There's an omake at the end, by the way, enjoy.

>
-Mimir's Well, Rainbow-shi, Asgard-ken, Heaven--

>
 "Aw c'mon, I think it'd be cool if I just tweaked Keichii's wish a little bit..."

>
 "No, Skuld. I said Marller couldn't affect one of the timelines, even one of those about to remerge with a mainline, that she was personally involved in. At least not directly. Same rule applies to you. Besides, it's not my rule, it came from Him."

>
 "Oh." Skuld accepted that. Mortals could get away with arguing with Him, at least better than Limited Class License goddesses could. With great power came great problems, usually.

>
 "Besides, if you wanted to see the results of that, all you have to do is check out 'Paradigm Lost' or even Jigen's entry."

>
 "What did Jigen do?"

>
 "In _that_ timeline, Keiichi decided that he really wanted to be popular, so he wished that 'girls like you would find him irresistably attractive' -wishing this from Belldandy of course."

>
 "Well, maybe if I just tweak something like THIS!" Skuld didn't even want to look at Jigen's entry, reminding herself that sometimes ignorance is bliss.

>
 Toltiir blinked. "You shorted out a navigational computer?"

>
 "It was prone to malfunction anyway." Skuld smiled. "And now...it's showtime!"

>
--Jusenkyo, China, 1992 AD-----

>
 Ranma charged forward, leaping after her father, currently a panda. The only thing currently on her mind was getting even with her father for leading them to a set of cursed springs. The panda slammed into a large rectangular booth, bounced off, and continued running as if all the demons of hell were after him. Having been responsible for Ranma's upbringing, in this case Father Knew Best.

>
 Ranma, having no concentration for anything except the fleeing panda, crashed into a boy who was walking up to the booth, himself intent on asking directions from this stranger.

>
 The inevitable collision and tangle ended up with three people inside a room that was quite a bit larger on the inside than it was on the outside.

>
 Ranma, clutching her head with one hand, put her other hand down on a certain switch as she got up.

>
 Genma blinked, watching as the strange booth slowly faded from view, making an odd

>grind-thump noise as it did so. He blinked again. Realization that he wasn't going to be killed by his former son was quickly replaced with the absolute bone-chilling certainty of what would happen when he told his wife that he'd lost her son. The best he could expect would be time spent in the panda breeding program.

> Shrugging, Genma Saotome started back down to the Guide's hut. With any luck he could
think of a way that he could explain it to his wife that wouldn't result in seppuku.

>
 So what was a "Police Call Box" anyway?

>
---Twilight Empire, UnderCity Sublevel 6, 4400 NE-----

>
 "Rannnnmaaaa!" Ryouga stared where Ranma had been standing a few moments ago. The catwalk was a smouldering ruin, with the metal itself burning from the energy discharge.

>
 "Come on, Ryouga!" The Doctor pulled at him. "This won't hold them for very much longer. We've got to get back to the TARDIS!"

>
 Casting a last glance back where Ranma had been, Ryouga followed the Doctor. "Ranma, forgive me..."

>
 The Doctor ran to the console as soon as both had reached the TARDIS. Flipping the switch to close the door, he checked the various gauges. "Good, self-repairing systems are back on line."

>
 "Ranma..."

>
 "I know, Ryouga." The Doctor sighed. "I saw Ranma falling, on fire, he...couldn't have survived."

> "If I hadn't left the TARDIS..." Ryouga looked miserable. He'd wanted his revenge upon
Ranma, but this...

>
 "Well, we can at least get you back where YOU are supposed to

be. Since you came from Japan, I suppose that's where we ought to go. Unless you had unfinished business in China?"

>
 "No," Ryouga shook his head. "The only reason I went to China was pursuing Ranma. Now... let's just go home."

>
 Troopers opened fire with energy beams capable of atomizing plasteel. By the time they reached where the TARDIS had been, it was long gone.

>
 Other soldiers surrounded the blackened and shredded figure on the floor. "Check this out, he's alive."

>
 "Damn, after all THAT and without armor." Two three seven was impressed. Even wearing her armor, she'd have been hurt.

>
 A third trooper tapped on a combadge. "Tell the Lords about this one. We have a prisoner but he needs immediate medical attention. From what I've seen, he's got combat potential."

>
---Twilight Empire, Asagiri Combat Zone, 4612 NE-----

>
 The announcer's voice was a synthetic one, custom designed based on the latest opinion polls and translated simultaneously into thirty major languages as not all species were physically capable of speaking Galacc. "AND HE WINS, AGAIN! THIS IS INCREDIBLE, GENTLEBEINGS, RANMA SAOTOME OF PSIMECH INDUSTRIES HAS ONCE AGAIN PROVEN HIS METTLE IN THE COMBAT ARENA!"

>
 The crowd at "ringside" howled their approval, the wolfen literally doing so.

>
 "Oh, and this brings us to our guest today, Kelar Shubb of Psimech Industries. Kelar,

>what of these rumors that after 110 years of use, you are ready to retire Saotome?"

> "Well, Senn," the mantis-being said over a translator, "we've learned all we can from Ranma, and we've made a tidy little profit. He bought his freedom decades ago, has gone on to train some of our Special Ops people, and has worked with our Prometheus Project scientists. Right now, we feel it is better for Ranma to retire and be returned to his original timespace locus. After all, the odds in any battle with Ranma are no longer really that profitable..."

>
 "Ah, so he's going to be sent back to his home temporal/spatial coordinates. That's wonderful, Kelar."

>
 "That it is Senn! I know if I'm away from my grubblings too long, it just brings an ache to my hearts. Of course, we DID put quite a bit of money into him over the years, what with all the training, rebuilding, biostabilizing, psionic enhancements, not to mention the genetic reconstruction. Still, we made a nice profit and our stock has steadily climbed since we acquired Ranma. So we at the Board said, 'oh what the heck'!"

>
 "Considering Ranma's fan base, this is a particularly good move, since the rumors started Psimech stock has increased 25%."

>
 "To which we thank all Ranma's fans, and Ranma thanks you too. The propect of finally returning home has just given him a new drive that we haven't seen from him in decades." The mandibles of the mantis clacked in a racial equivelant of a grin. "In the meantime, thank you for your support, all of you."

>
 "There you have it, and we return you to ringside..."

>
-----Somewhere-----

>
 The thick shiny gel bubbled slightly as the occupant of the bath moved. What appeared to be a decorative slimy lump of fungus was touched by a thin tentacle.

>
 "Yes, boss?" The modulated voice of the secretary came from an

authentic human skull tastefully accented with fake maggots (the real ones kept dying in the atmospheric conditions of the bathing pit).

>
 "Saotome is going home where he has a reasonable chance of living a peaceful retirement from the arena," the fanged speaking tube of the Druglord Clipke spoke in what sounded like a gentle and reasonable voice to his underling. "This must not be permitted. Make sure that one of our agents arrives to make his life interesting."

>
 The fungoid being on the other end didn't speak of the difficulties involved, or the problems in getting information from PsiMech Industries. His boss wasn't interested. "Yes sir."

>
-----Nerima, Japan 1992-----

>
 Lightning flared. What was particularly strange about the lightning was the way the sparks appeared in midair then accumulated into a circular shape.

>
 A body jumped out of the circle, wearing a red gi, black t-shirt, and something akin to lowcut mocassins. "I'm back..." Ranma's eyes ran over the way the streets looked. It had been so very very long. Signposts in his native language, not Galact or Fethur, or Thiskul, but in Japanese!

>
 The panda took three steps back before he realized who it was. Fairly difficult as this person appearing was taller, more muscular, and looked a few years older than when the two had last met. A sign appeared. [Ranma?!?]

>
 "Pop?" Ranma's eyes misted over. He was a pain in the fanny more often than not, but Genma was still his father. Time had healed most of those wounds to the level of hazily recalled unpleasant memories. "It's been so long..." It HAD worked, they had traced the timeline and thought they had a lock on where he SHOULD be.

>
 [Where have you been for the past three days?]

>
 "Three days?" Ranma thanked the kami, he'd run into two dozen faith systems on a hundred worlds, and had been more intrigued by the points they had in common over the ones they did not. Just in case any were listening, he made it a nondenominational thank you. Considering the odds they'd cautioned him on, getting even this close was incredible. "Damn, pop. I thought I'd never see you again. As for where I've been, well, I don't think you'd believe me."

>
 [Tell me about it later, son. We have to go meet a friend of mine.] The panda was relieved. He had sent the postcard prior to Jusenkyo, and now he could actually deliver on the promise.

>
 "Sure thing, oyaji." Ranma smiled. He was back, no more alien monsters to fight. There was ramen and okonomiyaki and rice to be eaten. He didn't have to deal with alien things that were either trying to crawl away from the bowl, or crawl away WITH the bowl.

>
 Life was good.

>

>
 "Ooo. It must be Ranma." Nabiki jumped up and ran for the door.

>
 "Saotome...my old friend." Soun Tendo walked briskly after his daughter.

>
 "Oh, I hope he's not younger than me." Kasumi stepped towards the door, following her father, having absolutely no clue how ironic that statement was. Akane merely sat at the table and sulked.

>
 "Oh my!" Kasumi stared at the boy being motioned into the house by her father. He wasn't too young. She placed his age as around eighteen, seventeen at youngest. He was actually quite handsome though the material of his clothing looked a little... odd.

>
 Soun pointed at the young man. "You wouldn't be..."
>
 "Hi. I'm Ranma Saotome. Nice place you've got here." He bowed respectfully. Actually he thought the whole thing looked rather cramped and dimly lit, not to mention primitive, but Ranma thought he'd have to get used to that.
>
 Kasumi smiled. He was young but he was polite. There was something odd about his eyes too. He carried himself as far more mature and adult than one would expect from his years.
>
 "So, you've been to China, have you?" Nabiki looked him up and down and wondered about the possibilities here. All she'd been hoping for was cute, but this was a rather powerful-looking and handsome young man. Nabiki grinned a little as she contemplated the possibility of having other interests in her life besides money.

>
 "Oh, is that panda your pet?"
>
 Ranma smiled at Kasumi, projecting calm. He thought he detected some minor telepathic abilities in the eldest daughter, mainly she seemed to radiate niceness. This could be interesting. "Not quite, if you'll get me some hot water, I'd be happy to demonstrate."
>
 "Oh, where are my manners?" Kasumi bowed and motioned inside. "You must be tired after your travels, please come in."
>
 Nabiki raised an eyebrow. Kasumi was flustered? Well, it was quite true that neither of them were getting any younger and the guys weren't lining up at the door. She was aware of her own problem, that most of the guys were intimidated by her and her reputation (well earned) for ruthlessness. Of having guys take her out, only to bleed them dry. Of course, that had been LAST year, but everyone seemed to remember it.
>
 Nabiki wondered about this Ranma, there was an almost palpable aura of strength about him, tempered with a deep sadness as if he'd gone through some great trial and survived.
>
 She caught Ranma appraising her briefly and Nabiki stared. Just for a moment she had seen something unexpected.
>
 Part of her success in dealing with blackmail, information services, and the like was an instinct for knowing who and how far you could push someone. You had to be able to size someone up quickly and (mostly) accurately.
>
 She just caught a glimpse of it, then it was gone. Ranma had known tragedy, and it still left a trace within his eyes. Then the control came back so much that she wondered if it had ever been there at all.
>
 "So where is my friend Genma?" Soun watched the young man carefully. A martial artist had to be able to tell a lot about an opponent by the way he moved. He could not read much about this Ranma, other than a supreme confidence that no matter what he faced this boy felt that he could rise triumphant.
>
 "Hmmm." Ranma looked at the panda, then looked towards the oldest of the three girls. "Miss, could you please get me that hot water?"
>
 "Oh certainly."
>
 "So this is the BOY you've made that stupid promise about?" Akane deliberately glared at Ranma, trying to communicate her disapproval of an arranged marriage with that expression. It was just another boy, after all, and they were all perverts. And she had to be polite to this one because he was a guest. Didn't mean she had to like it, though. Akane eyed the boy anyway. Just because he was tall, fairly handsome, broad shouldered, and looked like he could have stepped off a romance novel didn't mean that he was not a pervert. Not that Akane would be interested in a BOY. Nope, never. Was it getting warm in here?

>
 Ranma looked at the young woman briefly with a smirk, noting idly that she was wearing a yellow gi. This might mean she was a fighter. Too bad she seemed to dislike him already. "What promise was that?"

>
 "Well, I wanted Saotome to be here, but we had an honor pledge made before your birth that you would marry one of my daughters."

>
 "WHAT?!?" Just when Ranma felt that nothing could ever surprise him again. Nobody had done anything like this before, thankfully. At least that he knew of.

>
 Soun continued, oblivious to the shock of his guest. "You've met Kasumi, she's 19."

>
 "I'll be right there." Kasumi's voice came from the kitchen. She was checking her reflection in the window as she waited for the kettle to heat. Not that she was interested in the boy or even conscious of her actions, just that it would be improper to meet a potential member of the family while looking a mess. Right?

>
 "This is my daughter Nabiki, she's 17."

>
 Nabiki smiled up at Ranma, continuing her appraisal and finding she liked what she saw. The hidden anguish and danger merely added spice to the deal. Everything had its pluses and minuses, and getting a handsome boyfriend would be a plus.

>
 "This is my daughter Akane, she's 16. Pick any one you want, she'll be your new bride."

>
 "Ah." Ranma thought about this. It was a matter of honor, and frankly he'd spent way too damn much time alone. The past thirty years had seen most of his friends on the circuit either retired or killed. It was going a little fast for him, but he had to admit he'd had a few opportunities over the years and he'd waited too long or been too indecisive and the girl in question had gone elsewhere.

>
 He glanced at the youngest. She was angry though somewhat cute. The middle daughter appeared to be fairly intelligent, and judging from the blue kimono she was wearing, was likely of a conservative nature. That she resembled a young version of a certain reporter he'd known was also duly noted. The eldest seemed either not entirely there, or had retreated behind a shell to deal with some personal tragedy but did have some interesting qualities. She seemed nice. He found nice to be quite attractive, also very rare.

>
 "Mister, uhm, I'm sorry, my father failed to tell me your name."

>
 "Tendo. I'm Soun Tendo."

>
 "Mister Tendo, then. I have just found out about this arrangement. With three such lovely daughters, how could I possibly make such an important choice based only on such scanty data?"

>
 Nabiki grinned. He had a brain, and he knew to use it. That immediately put him above most of the other boys she knew. It certainly put him above all those idiots going along with Kuno's "you must beat Akane in order to date her" crowd.

>
 Akane grumbled a bit but remained silent as she made a mantra for the occasion. #Don't pick me, don't pick me, don't pick me...#

>
 That was sufficiently loud that Ranma picked up on the telepathic suggestion, and raised an eyebrow. "Well, I don't think your youngest daughter is that happy with the idea, so let's not include her, hmm?"

>
 Akane opened her eyes in disbelief and stared at the tall boy in front of her. "You're not interested in me? You're not going to choose me?"

>
 "Err. No." Seeing the skepticism on the young girl's face, Ranma added. "You have my word of honor, I will not seek to be engaged to or marry you."

>
 Akane grinned, relief washing over her. She had a feeling this was one of those guys who would rather die than violate his word of honor. One less *boy* to worry about! "Welcome to the Tendo dojo, Ranma. Glad to meet you."

>
 "Here's the hot water, Ranma," Kasumi brought the kettle in. She smiled at him as he grinned back at her and nodded his thanks.

>
 "Uhm, you might want to sit down for this." Ranma brought the kettle over and measured a splash of hot water onto the panda.

>
 "HOT! TOO HOT!"

>
 "Oh my!"

>
 "No way!"

>
 Akane was silent as the relief gave way to anxiety. She didn't want to be the one chosen, but she wasn't sure if she cared to be dismissed so quickly and offhandedly. And permanently. Up until Kuno's challenge, she'd always been the tomboy that was selected for guys' roles in the school plays. She had been flattered by the attention until she'd heard Kuno quoting Shakespeare's "Taming of the Shrew."

>
 "My old friend! How did you?"

>
 "It was training in China, that did this," Ranma explained. He quickly covered the salient points of the Jusenkyo curse. "...of course that isn't even a patch on what happened after that."

>
 "Ranma...you're cursed too?" Kasumi looked down at the table. It had all been going so well, too. She couldn't handle being engaged to a panda...

>
 "Oh my son, what a disappointment you are to your father." Genma grabbed Ranma's gi and prepared to throw him into the koi pond. Ranma wouldn't budge.

>
 "Pop. Let go. I'll demonstrate without disturbing the koi." Seeing that his father wasn't letting go, Ranma touched two pressure points and Genma's arms went suddenly limp.

>
 Akane thought about it some more. While having boys trying to pound on her regularly in order to date with her, she knew the entire thing had started from her complaint that she didn't get enough sparring partners to practice the Art with. Then Kuno had made that stupid speech. She suspected that Nabiki, regularly setting up betting pools based on how long it took Akane to defeat the crowd, was responsible for the concept reaching Kuno's ears. Akane KNEW that some of the boys in question were merely idiots, others going along with it out of peer pressure, and others because of the girls that refused to go out with any boys because of some show of solidarity with Akane. That one guy had so quickly and overwhelmingly rejected her was aggravating. Why did this guy think HE was so hot?

>
 "Actually," Ranma said as he smiled reassuringly at them, "compared to oyaji's curse, mine isn't so bad. I don't like it, but at least I remain human." Ranma took a glass of water from the table and splashed himself, becoming a busty young woman as the curse activated.

>
 Akane blinked. The transformation was enough to derail her train of thought. "You're a girl?!"

>
 Ranma raised an eyebrow at her. "I'm a guy. The physical body is the only thing that changes, and it can easily be reversed."

>
 Noting the expressions of the group, he heated the remaining water in the glass with a minor chi trick, then returned to being

male. "It's a curse, it's something you learn to live with. If I had been in some disfiguring accident, would that make me a freak? If I had lost an arm or a leg, would that make me less of a man?"
>
 In Shinto, it would, but Ranma had been out of the Japanese culture for decades and so didn't remember that.
>
 Ranma shook his head, a little saddened by the continuing looks of revulsion, but arguing with them now wouldn't change their minds.

>
 Kasumi and Nabiki exchanged a glance. While the curse was nauseating to contemplate in certain situations, Ranma had made an excellent point about it.
>
 "There's more you should know, but it's not important right now." Ranma thought about it. "Tell you what, Mister Tendo. Why don't we let THEM decide, oh, about a week from now, which one of them would be engaged to me."
>
 Genma blinked. "You're not upset about this?"
>
 "Why?" Ranma shrugged. "Frankly with all I've been through, some stability in my life would be most appreciated. If it turns out that one of these two can be a good friend, then that's exactly what I could use right now. Anything more, well, that takes time."
>
 Kasumi blinked. That was certainly far more reasoned out than she would expect from a very young man. She wondered how old Ranma really was.
>
 Nabiki grinned. Ranma thought things out and was patient. Two qualities that made for a good business associate. This COULD be interesting. It was a pity about the curse though she knew there were pluses and minuses to ANY situation.

>

>
 Ranma looked over everyone as they ate. He had developed the habit of using any quiet time for sorting things through, thinking ahead, laying battle plans and the like.
>
 Ranma ignored his father stealing food from his bowl. It was embarrassing to have such a childish father, drawing further attention to this display would only encourage him. Instead he looked over the group, first as possible team-mates if any number of the "skeletons" in his "closet" came back to haunt him.
>
 Kasumi. Fighting potential: poor. She had a fair amount of chi, but from what he had observed earlier, she just wasn't cut out to be a fighter. As Seyvu had said to him one day, not someone you'd have at your side in a firefight - but ah, they make the getting home again so sweet. Of course, Seyvu was referring to his mate, a sweet little girl who resembled a short T-Rex with long arms terminating in clawed hands. Of course, that also described Seyvu. He'd never gotten the hang of being able to tell what gender a particular seljuk was from just looking.
>
 Nabiki. Ranma had actually dated someone who had resembled Nabiki superficially, just color the hair a metallic silver and the eyes a deep blue-black and you'd almost have Ca'th Armand. Ranma wondered if the reporter for the news service remembered him at all. There had been that night after the Hachiman fight that could easily have become even more memorable.
>
 Back to Nabiki. All indications were that her chi level was lower than Kasumi's. Physical strength, though, looked to be slightly higher. High metabolic rate combined with a certain crafty intelligence. Such a person could be an asset in a battle.
>
 Akane. Fighting potential: good, from what he could see. Was initially angry, though she'd cheered up enormously and then gotten lost in thought after he'd excluded her from the engagement proceedings. If he spent too much time with her though, it would probably cause problems with whichever ended up as his fiancée.

>
 In a fight, out of this group, he'd probably choose Nabiki if he had to have backup in a fight. If she was anything like Ca'th, then she'd be clever and nasty and inventive. Not a frontline fighter, but might be able to handle a combat mecha. Considering the number of times she had something in her mouth (a pencil, rice cracker, or something) probably had a bit of an oral fixation. That could be a problem with a full environmental exoskeleton, but with a simple booster-suit or something along that line there were possibilities. Second choice, Kasumi. Not as a combatant, but in a support role she could well be indispensable.

>
 Akane could possibly be trained to be a better warrior so that he had backup if the situation required it. He'd have to check with her later, though be careful about how he did it so as not to give her a false impression.

>
 "So, Ranma," Kasumi began, interrupting his reverie. "Your clothes..."

>
 "Yes, Kasumi-chan?" Ranma saw her color slightly and caught himself. Damn, he had spent so long in a radically different culture he had forgotten about many things. Had he just insulted her? He gave her his best smile, hoping she'd forgive whatever gaffe he'd committed.

>
 "Oh my." Kasumi blinked a couple of times before continuing. That smile combined with a term of endearment had a devastating effect. It had been quite some time since she'd been a "Kasumi-chan" to ANYONE. She tried to ignore the little thrill it gave her to think that someone saw her as a woman. Not as a surrogate mother, not as a housewife, not as some sort of 1001 use household appliance, but as a living breathing woman. She ruthlessly suppressed the impulse to glomp Ranma. It wouldn't be proper. "That fabric your clothes are made of. What is it?"

>
 Ranma stopped and thought about this. He knew that he'd have to tell them sooner or later. "Do you remember what I said earlier about the curse not being the strangest thing in my life?"

>
 "Yes..." Kasumi smiled, still blushing a little. The way he smiled at her was difficult to interpret, but she thought she knew what it meant. This was too close to the spotlight for her to be comfortable, but thoughts kept swirling around her that this handsome polite stranger found her attractive as well. There had been no one to tell her anything like that for quite some time, and long-suppressed hormones were stirring themselves from their slumber.

>
 Nabiki looked on, quite interested and not noticing the delicate flush stealing over her elder sister's features. Stranger than changing into a girl when splashed with cold water?

>
 Akane looked a little less distracted, while both Genma and Soun merely exchanged a glance and shrugged.

>
 "Well, I kinda took an unexpected trip." Ranma rooted around in a pocket and pulled out a silver marble that he laid on the table. The commands for the album were in Galacc, so he'd just have to use that. "%Album. Activate. Image title 'Beach At Orion Four'. Display at default size.%"

>
 Genma and Soun jumped as a fan of light stabbed up from the marble. Something like a photograph appeared, though the clarity was unusually high and everyone was seeing the same picture, though they were all viewing it at different angles.

>
 Nabiki's eyes bugged out as she realized what she was looking at. The technology level responsible for such a device at that size was staggering. Nabiki, more than her family or Genma, had a fair idea of what impossibilities were involved. "A color hologram? There

are two suns showing..."

>
 "Oh my. What a big bug that is." Kasumi looked at the odd people in the photo, one of whom was playfully punching the image of Ranma in the center. One of whom looked rather like some sort of beetle. All except Ranma were clearly not human, though the skunklike figure was fairly close to human in overall appearance.

>
 "That's a Thiskul, one of the Thranx lookalikes. They inhabit a planet about 400 light years away, I guess. Two days travel by liner." Ranma's voice turned wistful. "His name was Gau. We...lost him about twenty years ago when a Sploogie rigged a fight."

>
 "You've been in space," Nabiki was looking at the marble and wondering how much something like this would fetch to an engineer. And this was something Ranma was treating as commonplace.

"Waitaminnute. Twenty years ago?"

>
 "Oh." Ranma smiled and shrugged. "Twenty years ago in my life. In real time, objective time, it was roughly four thousand years in the future."

>
 Ranma waited a few minutes, while everyone reacted with varying degrees of disbelief. He had expected this reaction, even if confronted with evidence. Such was human nature. "%Switch display to page thirty-seven.%"

>
 The image of a crowded beach faded. Replaced with an entirely different image. The default on this one was set in a globe, so that the table and people at it seemed to be suspended completely within deep space.

>
 "Oh, how nice." Kasumi looked over at a nearby planet and moon, shown with an immense red sun behind them. She liked this, why, one could take a trip and never leave one's house. How wonderfully convenient. One could travel the universe and still be back home in time for dinner. This was even better than the special effects in that "Star Wars" movie.

>
 "Who the?! Is that..." Nabiki ran out of words abruptly as she felt her mind lock up at what she was seeing.

>
 "Oh, Nabiki, she looks a lot like you." Kasumi smiled as she caught a glimpse of the woman who was standing on some circular podium, seemingly inspecting them.

>
 "That is a 'friend' of mine. Watch this." Ranma smiled and switched languages to Galact again. "%Play recording. Use translation routine to replay voice in 20th Century Japanese.%" The picture began moving. The woman, who resembled an older Nabiki except for the hair and eye color, pouted a little and tossed her head back. There wasn't a lipsync as she spoke.

>
 "Well, Ranma, you've just won yet another battle, this time against a full conversion warborg. How do you plan on celebrating?" The pout turned into a sultry smile.

>
 A disappointed look flickered over her face. "Oh, c'mon Ranma, you are SO old-fashioned. Loosen up. You only go around once in life, twice if you're lucky."

>
 Nabiki watched her "twin" go into a near duplicate of her exasperated routine. "I swear, Ranma, you are SUCH a prude. One of the ace reporters of the Galaxy News Agency tries to get you in the sack, and all you can think about is a way to get home and what this is going to do in your next battle..."

>
 The image froze as it came to the end of the recording.

>
 "Who..." Nabiki managed after she got her throat working again. Her normally immaculate hair was now sticking up at odd angles. She considered fainting.

>
 "Ca'th Armand. Reporter for a news agency. Transferred out of war correspondence when she got killed the first time. Turned to combat sports, and followed my career for years. She...left me right

after this recording was taken." Ranma's voice dropped. "She had needs...needs that I was not willing to meet at that time. She went to fill them elsewhere."

>
 "Needs?" Akane asked, coloring slightly.

>
 "Oh my." Kasumi colored a bit more than Akane.

>
 Nabiki mouthed the word "needs" silently and was glad she was sitting down. She decided she was going into information overload and needed some sleep. This was quite overwhelming.

>
 "%Deactivate. Switch off.%"

>
 Ranma glanced around. "Look, I've been through a LOT of things when I left Pops back at Jusenkyo, then ended up in one of the alternate futures, but I'm back in my own time now. I've spent a lot of time in a culture not even remotely like 'modern' Japan.

>
 "Oh, and Kasumi, the clothing is made of special self-repairing fabrics. I'll have to ask everyone NOT to open my backpack. The anti-theft devices are not something you want to experience."

>
 Genma hid a smirk. No burglar alarm would keep HIM from finding out if the boy had anything valuable hidden in there.

>
 Akane looked at Ranma again, a completely different thought occurring to her. "Ranma, you've been in space, in some future, fighting, from what that girl said?"

>
 "Yes, Akane?" Ranma sipped at his tea and put the marble away.

>
"Learn any special techniques? Can you teach me?"

>
 Ranma smiled and nodded.

>

>
 "So you've done all this and you're still willing to go to school?" Nabiki frowned. Oh yes, there were SO many ways she could turn a profit from this guy. If just half the stuff he referred to had happened, he was a prize. If he knew any of the details about the sort of things he casually referred to, he went beyond valuable. The problem, as Nabiki saw it, was what to go for. Sure, she could betray any confidences and go straight for the short term profit. That would alienate Ranma, but she could probably live off the proceeds of just what was in his backpack in such luxury that she could buy the Kunos and have them working as houseslaves.

>
 On the other hand, there was something to be said for long term planning. If she played her cards right, Nabiki knew that she could have wealth and fame and power, and more than that. Both choices certainly had their risks and the attendant rewards. In another place, another Reality, Nabiki might have chosen to react with disgust and horror to the curse and have the loneliness curdle within her. Here and now, however, this was an acquisition she was seriously considering.

>
 Ranma, not listening to Nabiki's internal dialogue, walked along the top of the fence next to her. The range of vision was slightly less impeded from a height, always useful when you were used to assassins and the like. "Yeah. I think school will be mainly amusing, but the sooner I can readjust to this society, the better off I'll be."

>
 Ranma spared a glance behind him. "You know, I don't think your sister likes me."

>
 Nabiki smirked. She'd prefer less competition anyway. "Oh, Akane hates boys. It's nothing personal. Actually, she's nicer to you than any of the guys at school. She's just that way."

>
 Ranma pondered this. Certainly he'd run into lesbians before, but for some reason hadn't thought Akane was that sort. "Interesting crowd. I'd think they were paparazzi but nobody knows me in this time, and some of 'em got weapons..."

>
 "Akane Tendo!" The swarm started forward. "This is for you!"

>
 Ranma hopped to the top of the school's wall to watch. Akane moved forward, fists flying.

>
 "RANMA!" Nabiki looked up at him. "Come on, or you're going to be late."

>
 "She do this all the time?" Ranma indicated the melee with his thumb.

>
 "Yes, everyday." Nabiki smiled as she overheard some of the muttering around them, the audience had picked up that the new guy seemed to know her very well. With the right rumors started in secret, she could then make money on giving out the correct information.

>
 Akane saw Ranma leap off the wall and make a spectacular landing thirty feet away. She wouldn't want to admit it to anyone, but she was impressed.

>
 Akane smiled a little as she launched a side kick into a sumo wrestler. Maybe if Kasumi was actually interested in Ranma, then Akane had a chance at Doctor Tofu. She could console the good doctor on his loss, then she could catch him on the rebound.

>
 Pitching her voice a little bit louder than necessary, Nabiki made sure her next words would reach some of the audience. "Well, come on, Ranma. As long as you're living at our place, we can make sure you reach your classes on time." It was giving away information, but it also allowed her to establish early on that this boy was spoken for.

>
 Ranma nodded and dropped from the ledge he'd landed on to the ground in front of the doors. No point in being late, he doubted that "fashionably late" was well received by 20th Century Japanese schools.

>
 "This boy is staying at your house," a voice came. Nabiki and Akane looked over at where Kuno posed, holding a rose in mid-throw. "STAYING AT THE SAME HOUSE AS AKANE TENDO?! I, Tatewaki Kuno, shall not allow this!"

>
 "Oh really," Ranma smirked. "You're going to challenge me? Third dan kendo, tops. Gee, this isn't even a decent workout."

>
 "Knave, who are you to hound Akane so? Wait, should I not give mine own name first?"

>
 "Am I hounding you? I'm sorry, it's not intentional." Ranma smiled at Akane.

>
 "That's just Kuno," Akane rolled her eyes at the comment. "Actually, you haven't been that bad. All things considered."

>
 "Aren't you paying attention? I SHALL SMITE THEE!"

>
 "Hey, Akane, watch this. I'll do it slow. You wanted techniques, right?" Ranma dodged back effortlessly letting the sword pass by.

>
 "Yeah..." Akane watched Kuno's strikes coming nowhere near the boy.

>
 Ranma deflected the sword to the side, using the same move to pull Kuno forward. At the same time, he kicked up into the kendoist's face as Kuno was pulled off balance. He kept his grip on Kuno as the boy went down, shifting his hands so that he had a thumb pressing down into the sword-wielder's right elbow.

>
 "If you press here, like this, he won't be able to hold a sword in that hand for a couple of minutes unless he knows the counter."

>
 "Ah," Akane said. She blinked and grinned, trying to remember that. Well, if one of her sisters had to get engaged, it was just as well the guy had some use at least.

>
 Nabiki looked down at where Tatewaki Kuno lay, sprawled out and

weaponless.

>
 "You took Kuno out with one shot..."

>
 Ranma paused to hold the door open for Nabiki. "Oh, c'mon. He wouldn't have lasted five seconds in the Arena." He dismissed the kendoist. The real challenge, he felt, was trying to adapt back to this society after all he'd been through.

>
 Ranma wondered if it were even possible.

>

>
 A postcard was received. Cologne smiled. The posthypnotic or the threat had worked, and she didn't care which it was. Time to see if this warrior was everything that fat fool had promised.

>
 "%Shampoo, get Sash, Shu Ga, and Tam Lin. They'll be your witnesses for this fight. We go to Japan.%" Cologne silently added that if the warrior wasn't all that Genma had promised, she would sell a panda as breeding stock to the local zoo to recoup her losses.

>

>
 The end of the week came quickly, with the days thereof falling into a strange sort of routine.

>
 Ranma awakening early to greet the dawn and go through some simple exercises that looked almost like Tai Chi. By this time, Kasumi was awake and had found a breakfast laid out for her along with a simple haiku, or a reference to some novel for her to look at. (Actually by this time Kasumi had been long awake and watching Ranma's workout from the gap between curtains.) Ranma had gotten fairly good at this sort of thing, the crowds in the Arena circuit had loved it when he quoted some popular novel, ancient saying, or made an impromptu haiku prior to the bloodshed. And, as he had an image to maintain, he had learned to cook. After decades of fixing his own meals, he had gotten rather good at it.

>
 Nabiki begrudgingly dragging herself out of bed to watch Genma Saotome begin some sneak attack on his son, attempting to start some martial arts practice or training. Ranma usually ended the battle by bouncing a panda around the yard like some big medicine ball. Sometimes he used purely martial arts techniques. Other times he used odd talents or chi attacks. It was always interesting.

>
 Breakfast was followed by the trip to school. Nabiki had arranged to be late twice during the week so that she could enjoy the sensation of being carried at a high rate of speed by Ranma to her class. Such displays did not go unnoticed, and furthered the betting pools as to who would end up with Ranma at the end of the week. That was the "official" reason for Nabiki to be carried by Ranma, given to the rest of the family. The truth, of course, was that being held within those strong-enough-to-bend-steel arms, being carried effortlessly through thirty foot leaps, and snuggled up against a warm chest, were all things that gave the middle Tendo daughter an enormously pleasant feeling. She LIKED this.

>
 Ranma reached school and faced huge crowds that could not believe that Ranma would NOT choose Akane. Usually he'd go over them. Sometimes he'd go through. Kuno, he largely ignored until that regrettable incident where Kuno pulled a live blade out and attempted to strike him with it. Ranma had shown considerable presence of mind and medical knowledge, and the doctors all agreed that Tatewaki Kuno would regain use of that arm.

>
 The usual classes, with Ranma trying to reconcile what he knew with what was taught. Current events and social studies were the most fascinating thing to him, as these were the very thing he needed most to learn at this point.

>
 After school came Ranma trying to teach Akane a number of moves

and manuevers that would assist her. Usually this was done at the Tendo household, with either Kasumi or Nabiki or the fathers watching just as a point of interest. This was usually followed by an exhausted or unconscious Akane being carried up to her room.

>
 Then came something Nabiki had insisted on, and Kasumi had seconded. Without father or little sister around, the two potential fiancees spent some time trying to get to know this potential new family member. Monday it was shopping with Kasumi. Tuesday it had been going over some of the items in his backpack with both of them, just in case either of them needed to access such things. The next day, Nabiki had insisted on a long walk - just the two of them. Thursday had seen both girls spending time going through Ranma's photo album with him. Friday had been spent dealing with Genma's attempt to get into Ranma's backpack. All three had a long talk at the Emergency Room. Genma's eyebrows would grow back eventually. Saturday was Kasumi and Nabiki going to a water park with Ranma.

>
 The only strange point had been when some odd Chinese girl had attacked Ranma, only to be disarmed, quietly and quickly knocked out, then left in the infirmary. Which brought everything back around to Sunday and a decision that had to be made.

>

>
 Ranma had faced full conversion cyborgs and dragons and demonic entities in the Arena. He'd been stalked by assassins, slavers, reporters, lawyers, and other unsavory types. He'd observed a black hole from twenty au out as it swallowed gouts of material torn from the heart of its companion star. He'd even gone out on a drinking binge (he had been the designated driver) with two wolfen, a seljuk, and a dwarf.

>
 The situation before him, he felt, fit into the same range of fearsome discomfort that any of those situations had caught him with.

>
 He looked down at the tabletop and took a deep breath. Then he looked back up to meet the eyes of those causing such discomfort. Nabiki and Kasumi both looked back, one with a speculative gleam, the other a polite smile.

>
 Akane, leaning against the doorframe, frowned slightly. This Ranma had proven to be strong, friendly, polite, and quite a bit more mature than she had expected. Akane wondered if maybe she shouldn't have resisted the idea of being engaged to this guy so much. Still, wasn't Nabiki too young to get married? And the age difference between Ranma and Kasumi was quite improper. She was three years older - how scandalous!

>
 "Now girls," Soun said, gathering solemn dignity around him as best as he was able. "Now is the time. You've had a week to get to know Ranma. You've talked with him, you've gone out with him. So, who will marry him and carry on the Anything Goes school?" His main concern, that Ranma be a capable martial artist, had already been sated. On to the next concern.

>
 There was an awkward silence.

>
 "I..." Kasumi flushed and started playing with her fingers. Being in the spotlight like this had invoked her own shyness. Still, he was strong, he was mainly mature, he was kind and thoughtful. He quite obviously found her attractive and was odd, but comfortable to be around. Kasumi gathered her nerve to volunteer, remembering a few moments from the past week. That moment at the water park where she had come out from the changing room and he'd said how beautiful she looked. The moment when she'd been cradled in his arms as he had leapt to the top of the wooden structure at the fountains to plan out

their next stop. Kasumi wanted more of those moments. And, of course, there had been what she had seen in his eyes when he had spoken of his exploits and the friends he had lost. Kasumi had seen the Need and Loneliness in Ranma's soul and ached to see it filled.

>
 "I..." Nabiki chewed on her lower lip. Boyfriend, yes. Fiancee possibly. The way her father had said that sounded like the ceremony was scheduled for later that afternoon. Still, he was intelligent, and he was strong. My goodness he was strong. She wasn't sure what his limits in that regard was. And with his knowledge of future technology and developments he could give little hints to keep engineering students running in circles for days. She'd been lonely, with nothing beyond money to occupy her. Here she could bypass the money entirely and go straight to levels of comfort and security that great wealth would normally be needed for. Nabiki resolved that as soon as she could talk through the lump in her throat, she'd concede that Ranma wouldn't be an unacceptable fiancee. She wasn't willing to have the situation control her, instead of her in control of the situation. Still, in business as in life, opportunity tended to knock once. Temptation knocked all the time. Business acumen was in knowing which was knocking and right now her instincts said that Opportunity was looking very nervous across the dining room table.

>
 Ranma swallowed as the silence grew. He should have known. He was just too weird, too strange, too alien. That fear had been building over the week, even though Ranma had tried to ignore it. He'd never be accepted by either of these two except as purely platonic friends. Too bad, he was really beginning to like them. Kasumi was beautiful, had a demure strength to her, and really seemed to enjoy their little trips. Nabiki could be really cute, had a fascination for his gadgetry, and Ranma had noticed the way she snuggled in when he had to carry her to school on those days she was late. In the Arena, the crowds had only seen the image of Ranma that his owners/managers had wanted projected and not him as a person. Having tried to open up to the two and then being rejected here and now was hurting him more than he wanted to admit.

>
 Akane's frown deepened. What was wrong with them? Why wasn't anyone speaking? She *knew* without a doubt why Nabiki found excuses to be carried those mornings. Akane also *knew* that Kasumi's interest had increased over the past week, to the point where you could see the way Kasumi's eyes tracked Ranma. Nabiki was doing the same thing, and there Ranma was looking more and more like he wanted to do a vanishing act. Akane acknowledged to herself that while she still thought the whole arranged marriage idea sucked, she no longer regarded this Ranma as a mere *boy* or completely unacceptable.

>
 "Shampoo accept!"

>
 The entire group made an eerie synchronized blink at that.

>
 The door burst open, unfortunately in little pieces, and a Chinese girl with long hair entered. She was followed by a short older woman and three girls of about the first's age.

>
 "%Shampoo, I told you to open the door. NOT destroy it.%"

>
 "%Sorry Great-Grandmama, but door is open now.%"

>
 Akane stood ready, her house had just been broken into, and she was anxious to test herself against a new opponent. She'd been learning techniques all week, and people had been trying to defeat Ranma instead of her. This looked like a good chance for a battle.

>
 "WHAT IS THE MEANING OF THIS?!" Soun Tendo growled at this, one of the most important moments in his daughters' lives, being

interrupted by property-destroying strangers. He was not a happy

>camper.

> Everyone present noticed Genma dousing himself and holding up a sign that read [I'm just a cute lil' panda.]

> "I'm afraid that the marriage of Ranma Saotome to one of your daughters will not be permitted. By Amazon Law, Ranma was promised to Shampoo by his father and then the marriage sealed when he defeated her in combat." The old woman smiled at the crowd. "It's a done deal."

> "%That was the Shattering Touch technique, wasn't it?%"

> The Amazons stared at Ranma briefly as he had just spoken in something resembling their own language. Not to mention he was naming Special Techniques casually.

> "That was the Shattering Touch technique, similar to the Breaking Point, wasn't it?" Ranma repeated in Japanese.

> "Son in law, we need to talk."

>-----

> Akane was keeping an eye on the Amazons as Soun, Genma, Ranma, and Cologne hammered out the details of an Armistice. Ranma had suggested getting out of the house before tempers continued to flare up, that it might be more productive to try and use a Western custom of hammering out a deal during lunch.

> If nothing else, a full meal and a crowd of others ought to keep the violence level from getting too outrageous.

> Akane dismissed the Amazon known as Sash after a moment. One look at Nabiki's manga collection, and *that* Amazon was happily chatting details of the latest romance manga with Akane's middle sister.

> Shampoo had wanted to accompany Ranma. Shampoo had been left behind. Shampoo was unhappy. Akane kept an eye on the door destroyer.

> Tam Lin and Shu Ga were more easily dismissed than Shampoo though not as happily oblivious to anything outside of their reading material as Sash.

> The crackling noise brought all of their attentions to something other than the tension of the situation. Excepting Sash who had to be hit upside the head to get her to put down the manga.

> A circular bolt of lightning, chasing its own tail, brought hurried speculation in two languages.

>-----

> "He MUST marry one of my daughters, it is not only a matter of honor but of long personal friendship forged under the suffering of serving under a demon."

> "Don't spit rice at me, sonny boy. By defeating my Shampoo, he's already effectively married her. Eh? Son-in-law, your watch is beeping."

> Ranma looked down with some alarm (and a tiny bit of relief) at the device. "Actually that's a multifunction wristcomp. But...oh dear kami, Nabiki."

> "Excuse me?" Soun blinked as his thought processes struggled to go in a different direction, having gained a lot of momentum on their current course.

> Ranma stood. "Uhm, I've got to go. Cologne, as an Elder you might follow me. You two stay here and take care of the bill, come as soon as you can."

> "Huh? What?"

> Ranma pointed to the display, exasperation clearly showing. "That's Nabiki's signal that she's in deep trouble."

> "But wait." Soun stopped as he became aware that Ranma was no longer even in the restaurant. The old woman was a visible blur heading towards the exit, presumably after him. "Well, I, NABIKI!?"

> Genma finished his meal, sighed, and noticed that he was quite alone. Looking around, he decided to sneak off before anyone noticed that he'd been left holding the bill.

> He didn't make it.

>-----

> Nabiki watched in amazement as Akane and the Amazons fought. She'd known that under Ranma's tutelage, Akane had improved. The extent of which was now becoming apparent.

> Two of the Amazons had needed to "retreat" from the battle. Tam Lin had been thrown into the compound wall with enough force that she had gone through it. Sash had managed to pin the thing's scorpion-like tail with a cloth namesake, only to be caught by a cloud of needles that a lump on the thing's right upper forearm had ejected.

> Akane bounced off the dojo wall, gaining height in order to execute a flying spin kick that made a cracking noise as it impacted the thing's head. Shampoo attacked one of the beast's knees with a pair of bonbori. Sugar spun an extremely large sword through an intricate move and brought it sweeping towards the creature's neck. It blocked, but would not be able to use THAT arm again.

> The creature countered, and Sugar skipped like a thrown rock across the backyard to impact somewhere inside the dojo. A moment later and its tail swung free to slap Akane completely out of the yard. The insectile mouth opened and Shampoo was caught by the cloud of white fibers which erupted. A moment later and the Amazon Champion was completely enclosed by a cocoon.

> Nabiki swallowed as the creature stepped forward and regarded the two still standing. Kasumi moved a little in front of Nabiki.

> The scorpion tail shot forward towards the apparently unprotected girl in front. It clashed against her forcefield, and Nabiki was abruptly glad that she had suggested wearing Ranma's gift to Kasumi. Even though the suggestion had been prompted due to the presence of armed warrior women and not a six-limbed bug-scorpion attacker.

> Nabiki's own device, the multifunctional box that Ranma had referred to as a "sort of electronic Swiss Army knife", had long since sent out its signal. Ranma had given both devices to his fiancées. A defensive device to Kasumi, an informational one to Nabiki. The only functions she knew for certain of were the emergency signal (Ranma had shown her that one) and another setting that had made the neighborhood dogs howl.

> The mouth opened again and the spray covered Kasumi and her forcefield. Nabiki's eyes widened as she saw the fibers move and squirm so as to wrap her sister up more effectively. Nabiki looked up to see the monster stepping forward and hoped this wouldn't hurt.

>-----

> As he came into sight of the house, Ranma summoned his armor. The wall separating him from the gladiatorial armor could be replaced later. The simple-looking armor fitted itself around him, adjusting snugly into place as the AI came online.

> "Sensor sweep, full, passive only./" Ranma paused his headlong flight for the seconds necessary. He also made a note to recalibrate for Japanese.

>
 "/Temporal flux detected. Aperature open for 5.37 seconds before dissipating. One bioborg detected. Splugorth manufacture. Warning. Parasitic organisms detected. Forcefield detected, not in

use by bioborg. Forcefield failing under energy absorption particles. Medium high threat potential. Response?/"

>
 "/Forcefield on. Full environmental protection. Chi amplifier ready on my mark. Specify bioborg as Enemy, native human females as Allies/Hostages using parameters from Scenario 911./"

>
 "/Ready. Running. Systems active./"

>
 "/Then, it's showtime./"

>

>
 The octopus-like creature gently brushed enough hair away that scalp was revealed, and pumped another load of paralysis venom into its victim just to make sure. Unlike the bioborg, its own armor wasn't that powerful. "This One?" inquired the biot of Those Who Command.

>
 "And These." Those Who Command sent back. "Secondary targets will be neutralized. Commence operation."

>
 The octopus settled itself into place, covering the first victim's face and sending millions of nanobots into the designated victim. Then the second, whose forcefield failed a moment later. Finally a third. By the time the biot had begun squirting nanobots into the third, the first victim's nanobots had multiplied to billions. As it finished, the biot noted that communication to Those Who Command was being jammed. Therefore speed was required.

>
 It had just finished with Shampoo when a small chi blast reduced it to smoking fragments.

>

>
 Cologne reached the compound to see a battle going on that managed to impress even her. A four-armed (though one of the arms ended in a ragged stump) scorpion tailed demon was fighting Ranma. The two clashed together on the ground, reappeared in midair, only to end up on the wall or the roof a moment later.

>
 The demon used blasts of flame, acid, needle shards, some sort of white webbing, and bursts of blue paste. Ranma used chi bursts, psi, and odd devices that extruded themselves briefly from his armor. Cologne particularly liked the chi-sword.

>
 Cologne spotted Ranma sparing an eyeblink's worth of time to target and fire a chi-blast at something other than his opponent, and the opponent tried to put itself in the path of the burst. Naturally her curiosity was aroused.

>
 Amazons had been scattered like chaff before the wind. There were also three figures bound with webbing and a blue paste on their faces.

>
 A blinking light on a box drew her attention. How odd, as she examined it (without touching, one doesn't get to be three hundred years old without learning a measure of caution) she had the distinct impression it was examining her. She looked over the three bound figures a moment later. "%Interesting. Now what to do? Wash this paste off?%"

>
 "%Switching to Ancient Language pack, Chinese-Mandarin. Avoid contact with nanopaste. Requesting assistance.%" The voice was a pleasant but nondescript baritone.

>
 Cologne's attention swept back to the box. "%Some sort of computer?%"

>
 "%Self is an AI device programmed by the Thiskul Gau and given to the Human Ranma prior to Gau Unit's death. Human Ranma gave Self to Human Nabiki as a teaching device and monitor. Request assistance.%"

>
 Cologne blinked as a hologram appeared over the black box. "%Assist how, exactly?%"

>
 "%Enemy device is a programming transponder. Location is interior dojo. If Self is brought to within two meters of device,

Self will be able to reprogram device which is in the process of reprogramming genetic structures of Human Nabiki, Human Kasumi, and Human Shampoo.%"

>
 Cologne had been called many things over many years. Slow was not usually one of them. She weighed the possibility this was a trick vs the possibility it was legit and moved accordingly. The chi blast she had observed earlier had burned through some odd creature that had a semi-organic look similar to the creature that Ranma was fighting. The box, however, was a sleek plastic and metal design that was more reminiscent of Ranma's armor.

>
 The box was in her hands and she headed to the dojo before another heartbeat had passed.

>
 Another heartbeat passed and another odd organic device was pried from the dojo wall by her cane to lay on the floor beside the black box.

>
 Cologne fidgeted for a few moments while the box hummed. "%Excuse me, but do I understand that you are an intelligent computer?%"

>
 "%Essentially correct, though there is little resemblance between Self and computers of this era.%"

>
 "%The blue paste is a poison of some sort? A hypnotic?%"

>
 "%Medical nanopaste.%" The computer paused briefly as it came to a tricky part of programming and it directed a major portion of attention to it. "%Hundreds of billions of tiny robots which rearrange DNA and organic compounds to suit the need. Used by certain races to permanently enslave their subjects, others to correct systemic breakdowns or malfunctions. Still others use it as a means of torture, some use it to alter appearance, while the Thiskul use nanopaste in their quest for Transcendence. Previous program was meant as a devolutionary spiral.%"

>
 "%I see,%" Cologne nodded, glad she hadn't simply wiped the stuff off. She'd have to have Sash explain this sort of thing to her later. It didn't sound pleasant. "%So you are making this paste inert?%"

>
 "%Not really desirable. First Self has to undo the damage already done. Then set the nanobots on a different course for programmed limits. Do you have any requests?%"

>
 "%Requests?%" Cologne blinked.

>
 "%Have already discovered several problems that might as well be corrected now,%" the baritone of the computer sounded almost pitying. That he was having simultaneous conversations with three others was not obvious to the Elder. "%DNA coding of Human, correction, designates Kasumi Tendo and Nabiki Tendo shows predilection for cancerous development. Correcting this. Weakness in ligaments of knee on designate Shampoo also noted. Correct this?%"

>
 "%Uhm, yes.%" Cologne blinked again. "%Things can be transformed from one thing to another? This blue paste can be used to correct genetics and medical problems?%"

>
 "%That *is* the main use of medical nanopaste.%" The computer sounded chiding.

>
 "%I see.%" Cologne goggled for a moment, then smiled. "%How much do you know of the current situation with the Tendos, Ranma, and the Amazons?%"

>
 "%Quite a bit,%" the device replied. "%Though my initial programming was by Gau and mating practices are considerably different among the Thiskul. The female doesn't try to catch and eat the male during the first few moments after mating, for one thing. Note that Self will not endanger or neutralize the Tendo units to

favor your candidate.%"

>
 Cologne shrugged. That would have simplified matters, but she could see *other* possibilities here. "%That shouldn't be a problem. How about. . .%"

>

>
 Ranma finally finished the biobot off by overstressing its regenerational abilities. Then, to make sure, he reduced it to the level of grease-spot.

>
 Unfortunately, Box wasn't speaking and Cologne's explanation was not all that Ranma could have desired.

>

>
 Nabiki relaxed slightly. She had been drowning in a cold darkness a moment ago. She had also been convinced that she had died and not made it to a good place. Then the nature of Nabiki's environment had changed. First the water had started supporting her, then it had become warm tropical waters. The lights had come on after that, and what lights they were.

>
 Overhead a ringed planet similar to Saturn could be seen, taking up most of the sky.

>
 Nabiki thanked her mother, who must have put in a good word for her to get this transfer.

>
 "Human Nabiki?" A gentle baritone voice spoke from midair. "Human Nabiki can speak. Require input from Owner/Operator."

>
 "I get servants in the afterlife?" Nabiki smiled and lazed back in the warm waters. She *had* made it to the good place. Or was this a test? Slaves in Heaven didn't sound very likely. "My name is Nabiki Tendo."

>
 "Designating Nabiki Tendo." The voice sounded curious. "Nabiki Tendo is fiancée of Ranma Saotome, does Self understand correctly?"

>

>
 Kasumi stretched. The forcefield had collapsed and she'd been surrounded. Then she'd found herself in the tiny room with razor sharp spikes all around. The walls had been closing tighter and tighter. Then they'd stopped and started moving apart. The wounds on her body had slowly closed, revealing new flesh behind.

>
 "Kasumi Tendo," a child opened a door to the room that hadn't been there earlier. "Kasumi Tendo, I have some questions for you. Please come this way."

>
 Kasumi felt a moment of embarrassment at being naked in front of this child, followed a moment later by the child handing her a white cotton robe. She stopped as she looked into the eyes of this child and realized that, appearances aside, this wasn't a human child.

>
 "Kasumi Tendo? Does Self understand that Kasumi Tendo is prospective lifemate of Ranma Saotome?"

>
 "The term is fiancée," Kasumi blushed slightly. Then her eyes opened in wonder as she stepped outside the box. A garden stretched to the horizons. The riot of colors were dazzling and twin moons could be seen hanging in the sky above. "Where?"

>
 "The Thiskul homeworld. Gau's estate."

>
 "Oh my. How pretty." Kasumi stared around her with a smile.

>

>
 Shampoo cracked her eyes open and noticed that she was no longer in the process of being eaten. This was evaluated as a Good Thing. She'd fallen in battle against one Thing, then been attacked by that shapeless thing that had begun flowing over her and dissolving her. Now she was on dry land being watched by a child.

>
 The little girl looked her over with solemn eyes. "%Shampoo of the Nichieju, I need to ask you a few questions.%"
>
 Noting that she was still missing both legs and an arm, Shampoo laid her head back down against the ground with a sigh. "%I do not seem to be going anywhere for awhile. Where am I? This odd jungle?%"

>
 "%Robinson's Forest on Taivor IV. It's a nature preserve, sort of.%"

>

>
 Ah, Nabiki thought to herself, it **was** a test. Entrance exams for Heaven. Well, it was always hard to get into the really good clubs. Lying would probably be a **bad** thing. "I am one of the potential fiancées for Ranma. We were trying to get that resolved when that thing attacked. My sister and I, and apparently some Amazon named Shampoo all consider ourselves to be potential fiancées."

>
 "Nabiki Tendo wants to be Ranma's lifemate?"

>
 Nabiki paused, but figured that it was all over now anyway.

"Yes, oh and can you raise the water temperature another five degrees? Oh yes, much better. Actually I'm the one who would have won this little battle, since I **was** the best one for him."

>
 "Why does Nabiki Tendo want to be Ranma's lifemate?"

>
 Now that she was dead, Nabiki felt more at ease about herself. Ah, to look back on one's life and realize how much foolishness had been in it. "He's good-looking, mature, strong, intelligent, and most definitely **not** boring. He's **so** clueless about some day-to-day things but treats the impossible as commonplace. I can turn a profit off of almost anything he does, but frankly he makes the monetary system tremble at his presence. What is money but security and the ability to get things? With Ranma and his technology, he bypasses the whole yen thing for the most part. Who needs billions to get a nice house when someone like Ranma can rebuild a mountain into a palace?"

>
 "Why should Ranma choose Nabiki Tendo out of the three candidates?"

>
 "I'm the best choice, quite simply." Nabiki didn't bat an eye. "The Chinese girl's from a primitive village who can't appreciate what just that holographic marble of his represents. All she sees is a strong warrior. Kasumi doesn't have a clue about the problems this Ranma will run into. Which leaves me, the person who can learn to operate these devices."

>
 Nabiki paused as an island formed nearby, she was now drifting peacefully in a warm lagoon lit by the massive planet above. Something began to register. "This isn't the Afterlife, is it?"

>
 "No," a child appeared on the shores of the lagoon. Interaction with the Human units had been analyzed and a few more changes implemented. His gaze was curious as he watched her try to cover herself. "No, this is a simulation of one of the resort islands on Garibaldi III, a moon of the planet Garibaldi in the Seshin star system."

>
 "Why am I here, then? Why did you ask those questions?" Nabiki wanted to go up there and kick the child's rear, anger briefly showing on her features.

>
 "Your consciousness is here while your body is being repaired. As it is quite painful, I've set all three of you up in virtual realities while the process continues. Before you ask, yes, your sister is all right. At least as much as you are. You were attacked by a nanopaste that would have rebuilt you down to the cellular

level. Producing this."

>
 Nabiki held back a scream as she saw the image appear at the lagoon's edge. "I would have turned into THAT?!"

>
 "The process was interrupted. Repairs are commencing. You may note some gaps in your memory, as data lost there was unrecoverable." The child shrugged. "As to why those particular questions, I had requested to Ranma that I be put in either your care or that of your sister. I may look like a common databox, but I am a fully formed Artificial Intelligence. Ranma has been friend and godfather to me, for all of his typically human response time. I like him and would like to see him do well in his Arena retirement. So I have asked you and your rivals the same questions. This way I can evaluate the responses and advise accordingly."

>
 Nabiki continued to stare at the image now lapping water up from the edge of the lagoon. The eyes that seemed to struggle to understand the world around it and failed miserably. Her eyes, lacking only signs of intelligence. Vaguely apelike, fur the color of her hair, long arms, possibly one of the precursors of homo sapiens. The most horrible thing about the image was the idea that there was enough of you there to know how much had been lost. "Kasumi and that Amazon?"

>
 There were three creatures at the lagoon edge now. Other than fur color, Nabiki couldn't see a difference. After a moment, the images faded.

>
 "All are being cared for. Estimate that genetic code can be rebuilt to 95% of the original."

>
 "What about the other 5%?" Nabiki looked herself over and couldn't see anything different.

>
 "What would you like?" The child looked at her with impossibly deep eyes.

>
 "What do you mean 'what would I like'?" Nabiki began to feel a lassitude creeping over her. "What's going on?"

>
 "Your body's reserves are being depleted and you're going into a deeper sleep. When you awake you'll be ravenous, by the way. As to what I meant, just that. Think of me as an intelligent computer, without hands but for the limited life of the nanobots able to manipulate your genestuff. A computer from that future that Ranma told you about, one whose storage capacity is greater than all the computers in your nation combined. Do you want to be taller? Stronger? Faster? Would you like your reflex time measured in picoseconds? It isn't much for me to tweak your metabolism or make minor changes. Before you get deep in there, is there anything you want?"

>
 Feeling sleep overtake her, Nabiki blinked her eyes open enough. "I just want to understand this hitech stuff..."

>
 The child nodded and brought the lights down. "Good enough."

>

>
 Kasumi considered the child carefully before answering his question. She would never have spoken like this aloud, it would have been impolite at least, but as this was some kind of dream sequence, she didn't have quite the need for restraint.

>
 "I was watching Ranma as he was going through his album, and I was listening to him. Not only what he said but how he said it, and what he didn't say. It surprised me that despite his apparent maturity and combat skills, he is quite vulnerable as a person. There is a great loneliness within him, a need to care for and about someone."

>
 "Ah, you spotted that, did you?" The child nodded. "He's lost many friends over many years, not so much by death as by drifting

away."

>
 Kasumi nodded, that was the impression she'd gotten. "There is a deep need within him to be able to trust and love someone. Nabiki has always been very possessive, and sees Ranma mainly as an object. I believe the Amazon also sees Ranma as an object. He needs someone who sees him as a person and can care about him that way." Kasumi nodded. Obviously as soon as she woke up, she needed to go ahead and tell Father of her decision.

>
 If only he wasn't so... un-Japanese.

>

>
 Shampoo tested her regrown legs. The arm could wait. "%Of course, Ranma is my husband. He's a strong fighter, quite capable, and the village needs strong fighters. As the Champion of the Village, I had begun to despair of finding someone strong enough to be my husband. Now that I have, it would be foolish of me to let him go to some non-warriors.%"

>
 The child looked sadly at Shampoo. "%Neither of your rivals see the matter like that. They see other sides of Ranma that you don't.%"

>
 "%It doesn't matter,%" Shampoo said with a sigh. "%It is the Law, and even if he is not an Amazon, I am. I must act in a certain way, and I must marry Ranma. Part of the way I must act is to eliminate the obstacles to my marrying Ranma. There are no other choices.%"

>
 "%Fortunately,%" the child said after a moment. "%I am not so constrained.%"

>

>
 "Alterations?" Kasumi blinked back sleep, slumping forward as the weariness rolled over her. "To me? I can't think of anything I'd want to change. Maybe if you find something that needs to be fixed?"

>
 The child listened carefully both to what Kasumi said, and the deeper roil of thoughts that she wouldn't have even spoken in a dream sequence and nodded. "Good enough."

>

>
 "%If I could wake up even stronger, then that would be good.%"

Shampoo yawned as she staggered. "%Need to convince husband that he needs to listen to his wife.%"

>
 "%You won't be able to win like that.%"

The child had calculated the odds and psych profiles and Shampoo attacking one of the others would not be viewed in a favorable manner.

>
 "%Shampoo will do whatever she needs to win,%" Shampoo said, her voice trailing off as she faded into a deeper sleep.

>
 The child listened and pondered. "%Anything? I think I can do something with that.%"

>

>
 "More please!" Kasumi set the dish aside and reached for the next one that Ranma handed her. She was inhaling food at a rate that put Genma Saotome to shame. Though that was still slightly more sedate than Shampoo and Nabiki.

>
 "More!" Nabiki did the same.

>
 "Need more!" Shampoo held her dish out, opting for a refill instead.

>
 "Oh my," said Akane, looking at the huge stack of dishes forming. "Maybe I should help you cook, Ranma!"

>
 "No," Ranma adjusted her apron, having rinsed off the dishes and gotten wet as a result. "Between Sugar, Cologne, me, and Sash, we've got the kitchen covered. If you can just bring the food in,

that'd help."

>
 "Aaaaaa! What's wrong with my babies?!"

>
 "Both the initial alteration and the repair were quite draining. The overall effect is similar to having gone without food for several days. Continuing to repair, but additional raw materials are needed. Hence their appetites." The box on the table sounded somewhat annoyed. Things were getting tricky and getting asked the same question repeatedly was not helping.

>
 "So, Ranma," Akane looked around at the devastation left in the wake of the attack. "Exactly how are you going to fix all of this?"

>
 "One crisis at a time, Akane-san, one crisis at a time."

>
 "More please," said Kasumi, neatly stacking another dish to the side.

>
 "On second thought, Akane, if you want to help. Could you take over cleaning the dishes? Hot water, cold water, shifting back and forth. A headache I don't need at the moment."

>
 "Okari," mumbled Shampoo as she set aside another bowl.

>

>
 Thirty hours later, three young ladies woke up to discover the problems with leaving a Thiskul-programmed AI with essentially a blank check and control of nanobots.

>
 "Aiyah," Shampoo held her head in both hands. "This very very strange!"

>
 Nabiki stared at a wall and twitched occasionally.

>
 Kasumi amused herself by staring at another wall. That little pieces of wood and plaster kept fitting themselves together and fusing into a rapidly repairing wall was not coincidental.

>
 Akane closed the door to the room, and crooked her finger at her sensei. "Okay, Ranma, you promised to explain this. I understand their genetic code was damaged, and this is only a five percent alteration imposed by the Box. I understand Box has its own agenda and likes being 'creative.' I understand all this. Dad still doesn't, but after seeing Kasumi make the mops and brooms dance they started hitting the sake. What exactly did Box do here?"

>
 Ranma sighed and motioned to the table. Cologne, Sash, Tam Lin, and Sugar were already there. "Okay, once more. And 5% isn't that accurate. Box felt that with the one attack, that something nasty was likely to occur eventually. Artificial Intelligences of his type are outlawed in the future by the way. Their processing speed is such that they can be having a normal conversation with you, AND be doing a half million other things simultaneously. In order to give them a measure of protection, Box took their input and went off on his own initiative.

>
 "All three got the basic Human Enhancement effect from an early genengineering project in 2072. There were hundreds of very practical genofixed traits in that model, and when it was introduced it spread through the generations until nearly all humans are descended from that group. All genetic deficiencies and diseases removed, supercharged immune response and disease resistance, wider wavelength responsiveness in both hearing and sight, enhanced metabolic efficiency, control over pain thresholds and reproductive systems, lots of little things.

>
 "In addition, Kasumi's psychic potential has been exploded. Telekinesis, Telempathy (projection and reception of emotions), I'd say some degree of Clairvoyance as well."

>
 Akane watched as a featherduster began cleaning shelves, the objects lifting themselves out of the way so that they could be

dusted under. "Offhand, I'd say Kasumi's managing to cope. What about the others?"

>
 "Nabiki apparently wanted to know about using some of my higher tech items. The problem is that most people don't know more than the basic minimum of how something works. Most people in this era don't know how a telephone works, they just know what buttons to press. Same thing in the Twilight Empire. Box didn't feel that was adequate. Nabiki's trying to deal with the knowledge equivalent of advanced degrees in biomechanics and quantum electronics among other things. Give her a little while and she'll be able to seal the knowledge off until she needs it.

>
 "Box thought that Shampoo's main problems were stubbornness, a surfeit of pride, and a lack of ability to see things from another's viewpoint. Box made what he thought of as 'corrections' on that design. Once she gets over that, increased strength and durability were what she asked for and are in the design parameters."

>
 "So it's powerups." Akane thought for a moment. "How much of that blue junk is necessary for that stuff?" Akane momentarily entertained herself with the thought of bench pressing armored cars, leaping tall buildings in a single bound, and the like.

>
 "More than what we've got," Ranma lied. He had enough troubles as it was. His enhancements were much more elaborate and powerful, but he could just see all the problems that would come from having genetically enhanced teenagers running about.

>
 There was obvious disappointment from the three young Amazons. Cologne nodded, she had expected Ranma to say that whether it was true or not.

>
 "Actually, Self could easily accomplish three minor upgrades with just the..." Box trailed off as his sensors registered the chi buildup near Ranma's hands. "Er, just little stuff."

>
 "REALLY?!" Akane, Sash, Tam Lin, and Sugar chorused. Genma and Soun, listening to the conversation from the next room, decided that the sake they had on hand was not nearly enough.

>

>
 "Akane's back in school today?" The boy slid his hockey mask down into place.

>
 "Yeah, today's the day things get back to normal." The sumo wrestler grunted. "That Ranma guy ain't gonna choose Akane, you read the latest odds. Akane ain't even in the running."

>
 "And I thought that Saotome guy was supposed to be smart," said the boxer with a snicker. "Oh, here comes Akane!"

>
 "What's she doing, just cupping her hands like that?" The Karate Club champion hadn't seen a move like that before. Must be something that Ranma guy had taught her.

>
 "Uhm, are her hands supposed to be *glowing*?!" The track star decided to move out of the way, having seen this maneuver before. It had been in a video game.

>
 "AKANE FIST!"

>
 A moment later, sedately, almost swaggering, Akane walked past the various scattered boys and entered the school. She wasn't about to be late. It would not be proper.

>

>
 Soun and Genma entered the kitchen, prepared to ask Kasumi when lunch would be ready.

>
 Kasumi hummed merrily as she read a book. Eggs cracked themselves in midair over a mixing bowl. Another bowl was being stirred by a wooden spoon. Ingredients danced a conga line as they waited their turn to be added.

>
 Music began to play from something in Kasumi's Disney

collection.

>
 The two fathers exchanged a glance, and quietly left. They stopped to watch a bag of koi pellets waddle out to the pond and shake some of its fish food out before waddling back in.

>
 "You know, Tendo," began Genma. "This kind of thing *never* happened when the Master was training us."

>
 "True, Saotome, very true." Soun's eyes tracked over the "mecha" that Nabiki was putting together, the Amazon Sash (still with her nose buried in a romance manga), the broom sweeping the back steps by itself, and shuddered.

>
 "At least most of the Amazons are gone off to open that restaurant."

>
 "Did you hear that Manga No Mori is having a sale?" Soun smiled as Sash vacated the premises.

>
 Genma sighed. "Well at least it's all over." Thunder rumbled.

>
 Soun laughed. "Yes, having survived that, we have nothing to worry about."

>
 Thunder rumbled again. The shrine at the back of the dojo crashed to the floor. A crow died in midair and nearly landed at the feet of the two fathers.

>
 "Strange weather you've got here, Tendo."

>
 "Quite, Saotome, quite."

>
-----Mimir's Well-----

>
 Hephaestus shook his head at that comment. "Well done, Skuld. So tell me, how does it end up? Does anyone make a choice or do they just leave young Saotome hanging?"

>
 Skuld looked thoughtful. "Hmmm. Well, this looks like a scene with major consequence, just under a year after the last one."

>

>
 Ranma didn't look up. "Hello, Ukyou. What's up?"

>
 Ukyou didn't say anything for a few moments, finally just coming to sit next to Ranma and look out at the stars with him. Ukyou tried to sort out whatever she wanted to say, and finally just decided to go with the moment. "What are you looking at, Ranma?"

>
 "You see that star there?" Ranma pointed. "That's the Seshin sun. There are twelve planets in that system, one is Garibaldi, a large gas giant that has two habitable moons. Garibaldi III is mainly tropical ocean with a few islands, thin but breathable air. Garibaldi IV is frigid, eternally cold, and has all the factories and heavy industry."

>
 "You've been there?"

>
 "Yeah. The Galaxy Arena Tour was something the promoters came up with back while I was still working off that Slave status. Fighting in a lot of various environments, but mainly getting kickbacks from the various offices of Tourism for showing off their resort areas."

>
 "Oh?" Ukyou paused and noted the way Ranma made a face as if he'd gotten a bad taste of something. "So what was the serpent in the paradise?"

>
 Ranma looked at her with a little surprise. "Perceptive. Nabiki never caught that. The Artificial Intelligences and Genejin weren't the only slaves there. It wasn't unheard of for someone to vanish, never to be found again. Except that they were there in plain sight, having been retrovirused or nanobotted to a more pleasing configuration. The average Joe and Jane discounted the rumors, of course. But they were there. Slaves talk among themselves."

>
 "You bought your freedom." Ukyou had heard the story before,

that first night after she'd come for vengeance against him. Only to find this fellow with the sad eyes and more than two lifetimes of experience under his belt.

>
 "It took forty years and then my former Masters had me on exclusive contract as a gladiator," Ranma made a little gesture. "Still, it was a helluva lot better than being a slave. You don't forget though, after you've been exposed to the dark and seamy side of that future paradise."

>
 "So, Ranchan," Ukyou tried the familiar nickname to see if he still flinched when she said it. He didn't. "What brings you out here, watching the stars and remembering the bad times you've gone through? Why aren't you home with Nabiki or Kasumi? For that matter you seem to get on fairly well with those Amazons."

>
 "Nabiki's spending all her time tinkering nowadays, she rarely leaves her lab if she doesn't need to." Ranma paused and sighed. "Kasumi and Doctor Tofu are now an item, Kasumi's gotten to the point where she can broadcast calm and overcome Tofu's little problem. Shampoo, Akane, and the rest of the Amazons are all back at that village. Akane wants to meet Mousse's parents."

>
 Ukyou blinked. "You've been dumped?"

>
 "I've been dumped." Ranma flicked a pebble out into the darkness. "Kasumi finds herself attracted to Doctor Tofu Ono. Nabiki doesn't want to commit. Shampoo spends all her time training and developing her new abilities."

>
 Ukyou nodded and let the silence continue on for a few moments. "You know, that bit with your father stealing the yattai..."

>
 "You want to get revenge against me still?" Ranma glanced back at her briefly, disbelieving. Then he returned to studying the stars. "I thought we'd settled that."

>
 "Yeah, well," Ukyou reached out to touch the shoulder of the guy sitting next to her. "The yattai was to seal our engagement."

>
 Ranma turned back to Ukyou, his gaze questioning. Chestnut eyes stared back into his, affirming.

>
 "Ah, then. Perhaps?"

>
 "Perhaps," agreed Ukyou, putting aside the spatula for now. Maybe there was a better, happier, option than revenge. She'd have to see.

>
-----Mimir's Well-----

>
 "O-kay," Hephaestus said slowly. "I can see this, kind of. Nabiki's an engineer and we *do* tend to get caught up in our work. Especially when everything's new and exciting. But Kasumi?"

>
 "Ranma was just too weird for her to handle, even with esper abilities." Skuld shrugged. "Hey, maybe at the five year mark?"

>

>
Garibaldi III, September 12, 1997

> Ranma stepped out onto the porch, listening to the surf gently washing up a few meters away on a strip of beach. He sipped at the cup of juice in his hands and smiled at the familiar tart flavor. He was both hoping and dreading this, but he had to know. Had his patience and waiting finally gotten them to the point where they were willing to open up? He'd spent years selflessly helping, guiding, assisting, never far from the spotlight but only spent as little an amount of time IN that spotlight as he could.

> He'd spent decades in the Arena, as slave, as soldier, as warrior, as entertainer. He was heartily sick of being center stage.

> "What's up, Ranma?" Nabiki stepped out of the shadows, regarding him for a moment. "You look pensive."

> "You've got the tour business going now, Nabiki. Kasumi and Doctor

Tofu are working in that clinic in Tokyo. Ukyou's off selling okonomiyaki to tourists at the beach and is talking about a chain of stores. Akane's married Mousse and is now working for the Galaxy Police. Shampoo and her sister Amazons have a planet where they can expand and remain isolated at the same time. Pop and Mister Tendo have their fantasy retirement two islands over. Everyone has what they wanted."

> "Except you," realized Nabiki. She'd been so busy that she'd only realized she hadn't seen him in a year when he'd shown up on her doorstep four hours ago.

> "Except me," agreed Ranma. "I wanted to find peace and have my chance to do what Seyvu and so many of the others did. Settle down, start a family, put roots down, and be something other than the warrior." Ranma wondered if it had finally come, the chance to love and to be loved. Not simple sex, but the deep caring that marked the difference between bedmates and lifemates. Ranma had set this conversation up with each of the 'fiances' - and was down to his last option now.

> "You wanted to be a nurturer, Ranma. You succeeded." Nabiki gestured around her. "You think that I could have started a multi-trillion dollar business on my own? My dreams had been to become a millionaire. By keeping the hyperdrive and antigrav technology my little secret, I've made the equivalent of trillions of dollars. Eventually others will get working models back where they can be studied, but it was *MY* work that brought about the New Age on Earth with offworld exports/imports and tours. Just the astrogational data I got from Box allowed ME to 'find' habitable worlds and stake claims first."

>
 Nabiki watched the man in front of her, noting that she still couldn't read him very well. She'd gotten a few letters back when she'd sent everyone her new address. She started giving out the details, though she suspected Ranma was at least as conversant.

"Kasumi would have settled down to be a meek little housewife, maybe to Doctor Tofu, maybe not. She's able to use clairvoyant techniques to see what's wrong with someone, and telekinetically mend wounds or telepathically ask the tissues to knit together. She and Doctor Tofu are *revolutionizing* medicine with him just figuring out what she's doing.

>
 "Akane always wanted to be the dashing heroine. She *is* now, a respected member of the Galaxy Police and someone feared by evil doers everywhere. Mousse has finally gotten over his Shampoo obsession and is now the supportive husband to Akane.

>
 "Shampoo wanted a strong husband, but mainly wanted to be the Champion and a hero to her people. She *is* - the person who convinced you and me to find that world and let her people settle it. They don't have to worry about the Chinese government or much of anyone. They've gone from three Amazon villages to an Amazon Homeworld!

>
 "Sash is the exception, she's working with Akane as a junior partner now. They're quite a team, too.

>
 "Ukyou wanted revenge against you, and to be the best okonomiyaki chef in Japan. She's now performing her craft in front of dozens of lifeforms and selling okonomiyaki to creatures that were old before the Home Islands formed! She's got her restaurant going, and if she goes to a chain, she'll be selling Japanese food across the entire Arm.

>
 "You've been responsible for the raising of the standard of living for billions on Earth just by what's happened to the Tendo and Saotome clans and the ripples from THAT. You've not only allowed each of us to embrace our dreams, we've exceeded them!

>
 "Isn't that enough, Ranma-kun?"

>
 Ranma looked sadly at Nabiki for a moment, then shook his head, not trusting himself to speak. He felt as if something had died inside him, a pain more cutting than most of those he'd gone through in his Arena days.

>
 He'd quietly vanish in the morning. Nabiki didn't get it. Maybe she never would. Even now she insisted on putting it mainly in monetary terms. She had her business, she had her money and knowledge and control. The engineer and the business woman wrapped up in one. There had been some closeness, once, but that had faded as her business took up more and more of her time.

>
 He'd come here to Garibaldi III and Nabiki's newly built villa in what had been his last hope. He'd gone through his options, and come up empty. Each of the potential fiancées had been given an opportunity. They'd all chosen. Not one had chosen him.

>
 Kasumi was helping people, the Healer. Akane was helping people, the Protector. Shampoo was helping her people, the heroic Amazon. Ukyou had her Art and her business. Nabiki was the Merchant Princess, whose empire was measured in territory and wealth.

>
 And Ranma noted that he was where he had been for several years, still sadly looking out into the night. Occasionally still fighting menaces from space or the future or both.

>
 Still searching, still hoping. Still praying.

>
 Still alone.

>

>
OMAKE OMAKE OMAKE OMAKE OMAKE OMAKE OMAKE

>
 Soun decided, he had to make some decisions to keep the dojo afloat. Marriageable age was sixteen, but one of the Imperial Princesses had been engaged at ten. Kasumi was sixteen now, Nabiki fifteen, Akane thirteen. Old enough to learn about the honor arrangements they'd been involved in. Two of which could bring wealth in, the third continuing the Tendo Legacy!

>

>
RELATIVE CHOICES an Omake, so don't even vaguely take this seriously.

>

>
 Nabiki blinked. "They're rich, but they live in a place like THIS?!"

>
 Kasumi and Akane clung to each other as lightning crackled and a cat howled somewhere nearby. Their eyes attempted to watch everything at once. Shadows seemed to move of their own accord.

>
 "Now now, it isn't so bad." Soun shook his head. "They're just a little eccentric."

>
 All three of the daughters noticed that the doorbell was a noose. All three of the daughters screamed when they saw the doorman.

>
 "You rang?"

>
 "Yes, Lurch, tell Mister Addams that I brought my daughters by to meet the future husband of one of them. And how *is* Puggsley?"

>
 "Follow me," Lurch moaned.

>

>
 "...and just think, one of you can marry Puggsley Addams and go live in that nice big house, with all the money, and I'm sure if you ask they'll put in a dojo." Soun finally stumbled to a halt. If any of his daughters were listening, it wasn't obvious.

>
 Nabiki stared straight ahead. She had been pulled out of the carnivorous plant, but hadn't recovered from the experience. She occasionally twitched and shuddered. Soun was ashamed that one of his

daughters was sufficiently far from her stoic samurai heritage that being nibbled on and viewing peristalsis from close up had rattled her that badly. As for the acid burns, why they hardly showed with her hair combed like that.

>
 Kasumi had her little smile but her eyes were glazed over. She'd bravely offered to help out in the kitchen, only to learn that it was far from the safe haven that her own kitchen was. It had been a horrifying experience. Even worse had been being attacked by the entrees. Soun still wasn't sure what had happened in the kitchen, but he had noticed the way Kasumi had kept an eye on the silverware the entire time they were there. And when that one young girl had said how much she wanted to serve Kasumi specifically, his eldest daughter had turned quite pale.

>
 Akane was still jumping at shadows and would likely have to be pried away from Kasumi at this point. Soun wasn't sure what it was, but going to play with Wednesday had apparently been an unsettling experience. Akane also kept feeling her neck for some odd reason.

>
 "Well, here we go, this is the second place."

>
 "It's clean," Kasumi noted, a tiny bit of hope in her voice.

>
 "I don't see any gravestones," Nabiki observed, but wasn't willing to get her hopes up at this point. It had only been a day since visiting the Addams, after all.

>
 "A big house." Akane calmed a little bit. No spiders visible either. This was a good sign.

>
 "This is where the Chardins live, come on, let's get lunch here." Soun smiled at the signs of life coming back to his daughters.

>

>
 "No, no, no more!" Kasumi's eyes were wild. That look was mirrored in two other sets of eyes.

>
 "Now now, this is the last one. This way each of my daughters will be engaged to marry, and everything will be set." Soun nodded solemnly. "It was quite difficult for me to track Genma down, but one of you marrying Ranma will ensure the Tendo legacy. In fact, this is the most important of the engagements since it is the oldest and involves the family property. He's not rich, but he's supposed to be a pretty good martial artist."

>
 "So, whoever marries Ranma gets our house," mused Kasumi. Ranma was thirteen. That was way too young, but all things considered what was a little age difference?

>
 "So, whoever marries Ranma gets the dojo," mused Akane. Same age. Gets the dojo. No little sisters with "play rooms" that had large spiky things and blades and a fondness for using various venomous creatures. Like that spider that had been nearly as big as Akane's head. Okay, he was still a *boy* but there was a difference between dumb and ignorant. He could grow up to be something like Doctor Tofu, you just had to get the caterpillar to the butterfly stage. And why had Wednesday wanted her to read that Necrono-whatsit book?

>
 "Is he cute? Doesn't have an extendible mouth or three foot tongue? Hang around with undead or carnivorous plants? Live in a house with evil witches?"

>
 "Yes, the house and dojo. I'm not sure. Definitely not on the last three. That's him," Soun pointed to a thirteen year old boy sparring with his father. "Now remember, you promised not to mention the engagement to him until he turns sixteen." Soun became aware that he was talking to thin air.

>
 Genma stopped at Ranma's sudden vanishing.

>
 "Mine!" Kasumi pulled at Ranma's right arm. She had been selfless long enough. Time to stand up for what was hers. Her kitchen. Her house. Not being served on a silver tray with plum sauce was also on that list.

>
 "Mine!" Akane disagreed, pulling at Ranma's left arm. It was for the dojo, after all. Besides, Ranma was a martial artist, surely he had more in common with her than either Picolette or Puggsley.

>
 "Mine!" Nabiki declared firmly, after all she could make herself rich and didn't need to marry into wealth. Ranma was into martial arts. Big deal, Nabiki could deal with martial arts. Iron corsets and oral surgery and forks being thrown by an old witch at one place, and the other place had plants that tried to eat you and food that crawled off the plate and a little sister that whispered how you'd look with a little plum sauce and 30 minutes at 350 degrees. As both arms were occupied, Nabiki tried to pull at Ranma's legs and succeeded accidentally at tugging his pants off.

>
 "Oops," said all three girls, staring at what was revealed. Fortunately he was wearing boxers that day. Unfortunately they'd slid a little from friction.

>
 Genma gave a puzzled look to Soun, knowing that his old friend wouldn't violate their agreement to keep the engagement secret until the day they were to make it official.

>
 Soun rubbed the back of his head. "Must be love at first sight, ha ha. heh."

>
 Genma accepted that and looked back to where Ranma trying to pull his pants back on with three girls still latched onto him. They were arguing about who got Ranma. Damn, his son must be more manly than he had thought!

>

>=====

>a few notes. the original "King Of Fighters" was mainly the first few scenes of this story. i got a lotta feedback from the FFML, most negative. comments like "Ranma wouldn't have any challenges" and "self-insert wannabe". that the charges were ridiculous was apparently ignored by these senders.

> Grey, reluctant incubus, a kind-hearted mortal transformed to a kindhearted demon through the actions of others, yet continuing to seek grace IS my self-insert character. i came up with him specifically to answer the SI charges. this is how i treat an SI character. i'm usually kinder to Akane.

>FORWARD TO ROWANSHADE:

>
 you'll also note that there are some similarities to Rowan's Private Bet #10. (where's Martin, Rowan?) i can only assume this is not unintentional, but more power to him. it's enjoyable. it's fun. that's all my fics have ever intended to be.

>
 The major differences between the King Of Fighter/Future Tense Ranma and PB10, and they are MAJOR differences:

>
 kof-Ranma wants to retire. he's mature, can rip his way through a Zentraedi battalion, and knows martial arts techniques that Cologne hasn't learned. But, as i'd tried to hint in the first story and i've indicated here, he has a longing for stability and to be the nurturer instead of the warrior. there comes a time when the warrior longs to put aside the sword, and that time has come for this version of Ranma. What i'm seeing in Ranma10 is he's still wanting to be in the thick of adventure. Part of the conflict with kof-Ranma would have been the desire for a peaceful life vs adventures that keep hunting him down.

>
 King-of-Fighters/Future Tense isn't slapstick "Three Stooges" comedy, nor was it even really intended as comedy at all. More or

less straight SF/F with more psychological elements than anything else, entire plotlines devoted to being a stranger in his own homeland and the Japanese are *very* hung up on cultural minutiae. It's the culture shock that's gonna give him more problems. The culture he just came from is *DARK* - this is mentioned repeatedly in the story. You can die and be resurrected in some circumstances, but life itself has little value. There's also slavery, racism, assassins, things which eat other sentients, and a number of other nasty little elements. On the other hand, in shining orbital ten-mile long cities, you don't see the dirt. Ranma worked his way up from slave, he knows about the dirt.

>
 lotsa powerups. i'd indicated earlier how i saw Nabiki becoming sort of a RIFTS Operator or mechanic, going after power (sort of) and comfort. Who needs yen when you can do things yen can't buy for a few thousand years? i'd played around with the idea of Kasumi The Psychic Girl and frankly the image of Kasumi pulling off "Mary Poppins" or other typical Disney magic scenes is just too interesting.

>
 originally i had Akane the victim of a telepathic mindworm. Eventually she would have been freed to become the powerful cyborg warrior/sidekick/apprentice while Ranma tries to retire from the whole thing with either Nabiki or Kasumi. The nasty treatment of Akane got some bad response, so here she is, seriously underpowered but treated much more gently. A pity though, as it is usual in this genre to go for "strength through adversity" so Akane would have gotten _really_ messed up so that she could be that much a stronger character later.

>
 Ranma-10 definitely has the edge in power. i'd placed Ranma without his armor in the same level as Son Goku at the end of Dragonball. With armor, he's just tougher and more adaptable, sort of like an Iczelion or something along those lines.

>
 As to Ranma ending up alone. Based on personal experiences, girls will treat guys like this all the time. It isn't good, it isn't bad, it simply is. Ranma's very interest will drive away some, his strangeness others, and still others will think nothing at all of using him up and then discarding him. That's typical "gentle sex" behavior. Your experiences may be different, in which case you have my envy.

>
 The FFML version had a Kasumi arriving the next morning ending, but i thought that this was a stronger (more realistic) ending without it. Besides, it's now open for Mirrors Multiplied to tie-in to it.

>

End
file.